

Questions and Answers about

Plague

What is plague?

Plague is a highly infectious bacterial disease which primarily affects rodents. Humans, dogs, and especially cats, can get plague if they visit or live in areas where wild rodents are naturally infected. The disease may also occur in rats that can live in close contact with people.

Is plague common?

At the present time, plague in humans is relatively rare and can be treated successfully with antibiotics. However, it is vital that the disease be diagnosed and treated in its early stages. If not, it is often fatal. If plague pneumonia develops, it can be transmitted directly and rapidly to others.

How is plague transmitted?

People can get the disease from animals in several ways:

1. Bites of fleas from infected rodents.

Hungry fleas will leave a sick or dead rodent to find another host and can bite people.

2. Direct contact with sick animals.

The bacteria in the blood or other body fluids of an infected animal can enter through cuts and abrasions on the hands or mucous membranes.

3. Pet involvement.

Infected rodent fleas can be brought into the home or campsite by a dog or cat. Plague pneumonia can be caught from a sick cat that is coughing or sneezing.

Where is plague found?

Plague in California occurs in the foothills, plateaus, mountains and foggy coastal belt. Plague is absent from the southeastern desert region and the Central Valley.

The major threat of plague to humans is in the recreational, wilderness and rural parts of the state as well as the suburban foothill areas of some of our large metropolitan cities.

Plague is most often associated with wild rodents; however, it may be transferred to rats in urban areas, increasing the risk of plague transmission to humans.

Which animals carry plague?

The most important wild rodents that can carry the disease are squirrels, especially ground squirrels, chipmunks, woodrats, mice and marmots. Plague is lethal to many rodents; therefore, any sign of sick or dead rodents is a warning that plague may be in the area. Other wild animals, especially rabbits, coyotes, bobcats, badgers, bears, gray foxes, skunks and wild pigs can also acquire plague but usually with no signs of illness.



What are the symptoms of plague?

Domestic animals can acquire plague and pose a direct threat to humans. Dogs rarely become ill but cats are highly susceptible and can suffer a severe illness. Pets can transport rodent fleas from the field into homes or campsites. If a cat develops plague pneumonia, it can infect humans by its coughing and sneezing.

The initial symptoms of plague include fever, chills, muscle aches, a feeling of weakness and, most commonly, swollen and tender lymph nodes, called buboes. This stage is called *bubonic plague*.

Contact a physician immediately if you become ill within 7 days of being in a plague area.

The usual incubation period is 2 to 6 days. Plague is curable when diagnosed early. Tell your doctor where you have been and what you have done that may have exposed you to plague.

If not treated in time, bubonic plague can progress to *septicemic plague* and/or *pneumonic plague*.

A cat with plague will become very ill, may stop eating and will have a fever. Swollen lymph nodes may occur, generally in the neck area. Inform the veterinarian if a sick pet has been in a plague area.

How can I protect myself from plague?

- Use caution when handling a sick pet that has been in a plague area, especially a cat. Avoid close face-to face contact. Consult a veterinarian.
- Avoid all contact with rodents and their fleas. Do not touch sick or dead rodents. Report them to rangers.
- Do not camp, sleep or rest near animal burrows.
- Do not feed rodents in campgrounds and picnic areas.
- Wear light-colored long pants tucked into boot tops. Spray insect repellent on socks and trouser cuffs.
- Keep rodent populations down around homes and other inhabited areas. Remove any source of food and prevent them from entering buildings.
- Minimize pet contact with rodents and their fleas by using flea powder.



For additional information, contact
San Bernardino County
Vector Control Program at
1-800-44ABATE.